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COLLEGE ENGLISH COMPOSITION¹

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I am glad to find the Club attracted to such a shop-worn subject as College English, in which I have been very much interested for some years past. It is only fair to warn you from the beginning that I did not choose this subject for your consideration because I have any new gospel to proclaim; I should seek rather to define my position as that of the hopeful learner. I have talked about it with a good many heads of English departments in various parts of the country, without, I confess, and I wish to say it in all respect, gaining much light from them. It seems as if God has hidden these things from the wise and prudent, as we must suppose all heads of departments to be; whether he has revealed them to—graduate students—remains to be seen; but as I have already suggested, I have hope and faith that some of the younger generation of teachers will make a new contribution toward a solution. If I can do nothing more, I should like to enlist your sympathies and stir your ambitions in connection with what I regard as the greatest unsolved problem in our educational tangle.

In the first place, let me say a word of warning as to what the problem is. It is not, in my opinion, an impossible task that we undertake when we try to teach the undergraduate to write. The aim that we put before ourselves and before them is not to make literary

¹An address to the Graduate English Club of Columbia University, October 18, 1912.

artists, to produce Paters and Stevensons and Merediths or even O. Henrys, but to enable the ordinary man to set forth such ideas as he has (or such facts as he needs to present) in an orderly and effective fashion, without mistakes in construction, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The aim is a modest one—some will say a humble one—but I believe it is worthy of the best endeavor of any intelligent man who aspires to be a college teacher. This side of the English teacher's work both in school and college is too often confused with the teaching of literature, or contrasted with it as if the teaching of literature were of greater dignity. In certain institutions, under present conditions, the teacher of literature enjoys a position of greater comfort and prestige; that is perhaps the reason why the older teachers of English in almost all our colleges cling to literature with a desperate grip, and the younger men clutch at that part of the work eagerly, with both hands. I admit that it is an easier task to inspire young people with a love for great literature—especially if they have it already—and it is still less difficult to reduce literary research to a tedious compilation of insignificant facts. But I am not yet persuaded that the teaching of literature, even at its best, is a nobler endeavor than the teaching of composition. To teach composition well requires intelligence, sympathy, and a degree of vital energy not given to everyone. It makes greater demands upon personality, and in college teaching, personality is of more importance and of more value than knowledge. I should not be averse to extending that assertion to all teaching, but the more limited statement goes as far as is necessary for the purpose of the present inquiry.

One result of the higher esteem—as I believe, mistaken—in which the teacher of literature is sometimes held is that the teacher of composition strays from his appointed task to teach literature. It may be that the two are inseparable—that the best way of teaching writing is by means of what is already written. I have no quarrel with that method so long as the teacher keeps the aim of teaching how to write distinctly in view. If it is agreed that the best means of acquiring a vocabulary is to learn poetry, by all means let the student learn poetry. If he can best learn paragraph construction from the study of Dryden and Macaulay, by all means

let him study Dryden and Macaulay. I am not a whit disturbed if the teacher tells the class that Dryden and Macaulay and the best English poets are worth study for their own sake. The student may "by indirection find direction out." But it does seem to me important that in composition courses the teacher should say *to himself*, "these young people are studying these authors in order to learn to write." The teacher, at least, should know what he is driving at, and should keep his aim continually in view if there is to be any hope of his attaining it. It is hardly necessary, I hope, for me to say that I hold no brief against the teaching of literature, the study of which has occupied most of my time and thought from my youth up. All I ask is that literature should not be taught under false pretenses.

Furthermore, I am in hearty accord with those who hold that the basis of all good writing is straight thinking. The student should be taught to use his mind; but I hold also that the best way for him to develop his mind is to exercise it, and the best way to exercise it is to endeavor to communicate what he supposes he thinks. The practice of oral communication which has been so successfully introduced into our class work by Professor Baldwin seems to me excellent, and it has the peculiar advantage that it does not leave the instructor's desk laden with a disheartening heap of themes. But oral composition, although valuable as one weapon in our armory, is not one that will serve on all occasions and meet all purposes. In my opinion there must be written themes, and many of them. The remedy for over-work in correction—again I say in my opinion—lies in an increase in the number of instructors and not in a decrease of the number of themes.

In this discussion of aims and methods we are, I hope, on common ground, and I have only taken up the time to mention these things in order to remove possible misunderstanding as to my own position. I do not know whether I shall carry you with me in the further statement that the results of our present teaching of composition are far from satisfactory. The majority of the boys do not learn to write. By "writing" I do not mean—the reiterated warning may be necessary—high artistic excellence or familiarity with the niceties of literary expression, but such a

degree of skill in the art of presentation as is implied in the composition of an important business letter, a committee report, or a newspaper paragraph. I have never been taken for a pessimist, and I wish not to exaggerate; but, that is the impression I gain from my own experience and from conversation with other professors, in English and out of it. In the Middle West, from which I have recently come, there is great searching of heart among those responsible for the teaching of English composition, and in my view this is one of the most encouraging signs of the situation. One of the leading teachers in that region, where composition takes up more than half the time of the English staff, said to me, "There is nothing on which the University spends more money, and for which it gets a smaller return." The great public, which has recently shown an unusual interest in the efficiency of college education, complains of nothing so much as this, that the average college graduate cannot write a good letter or draw up a clear statement of facts. The Oxford tutors of Rhodes Scholars from the United States found the inability to write English the most conspicuous defect of the men sent across the Atlantic, and these confidential reports were drawn up separately and independently. If we could take these reports at their face value, positively as well as negatively, we should be driven to the curious conclusion that the American boy who is taught to write English cannot write English, while the English boy who is not taught, can. But even if this were true (which I am slow to believe) it would not follow that the abolition of English composition teaching in this country, or the adoption in its place of the classical curriculum in force in the schools from which the English universities draw the vast majority of their students would produce the same results on this side of the Atlantic. The English universities draw very largely from a select class, in which the use of correct English becomes habitual from a very early age, and in which the misuse of English is a mark of social disqualification. What we should need to do to obtain the benefits of the English system would be to import, not new methods or new teachers, but new parents.

But can the English boy write English? I doubt very much whether the power of expression is any commoner in that favored

isle than it is with us. I remember, when I was teaching composition in a Canadian school of engineering, a Freshman who came to me and said, "Do I have to learn English? I don't need to. I know English. I am English." I assured him that his syllogism was faulty and, when he remained unconvinced, crushed him with the weight of the university regulations. I found that he did not know English, though I confess that he soon learnt it, so far as was deemed necessary for the professional purposes of the engineer's calling. He was a fair specimen of his class, and his superiority to the average American Freshman was not greater than would be accounted for by his superior social opportunities. In my opinion, it had nothing to do with his education, if that term is restricted to the hours spent in school. The fact is that the average English boy is not much better off than the average American boy in this respect, if we leave out of count the children of recently arrived foreign immigrants. An old colleague of mine in England, Mr. P. J. Hartog, the registrar of the University of London, does not take the favorable view of the English boy's ability to write English implied by the report of the Oxford tutors. He says bluntly:¹ "The average English boy . . . cannot write English at all," and he gives ample evidence in support of his assertion, including a Board of Education report which states that the average pupil of the secondary schools under inspection in England "has no acquaintance with the English language as used by those who know how to use it, and it is not surprising that when he attempts to express himself on paper, or orally, he has little skill or facility." Mr. Hartog goes on to say: "We have seen that the English boy cannot express himself in English, while the French boy is capable of expressing himself in French. Thus the use of French methods as a remedy for English incompetence in this matter seems clearly indicated."

Is it possible that in this charming syllogism of Mr. Hartog's, "The English boy is not taught English and cannot write English; the French boy is taught French, and he can write French," there is a gleam of light for us to follow? I am afraid not. Mr. Hartog's description of the French system, in another contribution to the

¹ *The Writing of English*, p. 4.

same subject,¹ is not encouraging from the point of view of American experience. He says: "A French boy learns by constant practice that if he has to write on any subject he must arrange his ideas on some definite plan before he begins to write. He is given easy subjects, and is provided with some of his material and with a plan ready made to begin with; and he is taught gradually how to find his own material and to make his own plan. He learns not only by careful writing but also by careful reading. . . . The supreme beauty of French style depends on an absence of 'beauties of style.' Everything is subordinated to the matter in hand. And thus the French teaching of style at its best is as exact and scientific as it is literary." Now this is just what we are trying to do, and apparently the French are trying to do it in much the same way. In the theory and methods of teaching composition, as Professor Baldwin has shown in a paper which he was good enough to communicate to me before publication, the French are a long way behind American teachers. Professor Karl Young of the University of Wisconsin, who at my suggestion investigated the teaching of composition in French *Lycées* while he was on leave of absence last year, and published his observations in a recent number of *The English Journal*, comes to the same conclusion. In his account of French methods, he acknowledges, "the American teacher will find nothing conspicuously new or original. In devices for teaching composition, our own country has been, for a decade or two, uncommonly prolific, and it seems quite unnecessary for us to look abroad for further information as to what to do in the classroom."

It is perhaps not surprising that some professors of English should in utter discouragement go the length of advocating the abandonment of college composition altogether. It is difficult to treat such a policy with entire seriousness, but every suggestion, however unpromising, is worthy of a moment's consideration. What are the disadvantages of letting English composition in college look after itself? Obviously, in the first place, it would put out of harness many estimable English instructors who are at present pursuing an occupation which, at the very lowest estimation

¹ *The Nation's Needs*, pp. 120-21.

may be described as innocuous. Some of these young men and women might be glad to be relieved of an uncongenial task if they were provided with berths in a department restricted to the teaching of literature; but it may be doubted whether this consummation is probable. If their only choice were the teaching of, say, mathematics or manual training, they would not be altogether grateful. But to be serious—and I promised to treat this suggestion seriously—I suppose letting composition take care of itself means leaving it to the care of the teachers of other subjects. If the teachers of other subjects were competent—a hypothesis I shall decline to discuss—I do not think they would have the time or the strength; we may put it in this way, that if they were able, they would not be willing. The Oxford way of teaching composition—one tutor to one student—is undoubtedly the best, but it is too expensive for adoption in American colleges, and indeed is being found too expensive for continuance there. The later movement, so I am informed, is in the direction of the teaching of small groups, because individual instruction takes up too much of the tutor's time.

English and French models alike fail us. Any improvement in college composition must be sought in a modification of the existing system, not in its abolition or in the imitation of foreign methods. What we need to do, in the first place, is to regard the system fairly and frankly, to recognize its defects, and to endeavor to remove them. Its main weakness, as I see it, is a sense of artificiality, existing chiefly in the mind of the student, but reacting also upon the mind of the instructor. The average Freshman regards his college writing as a stunt—a task as much apart from common life as the solving of a quadratic equation or the playing of a game of chess. If I may plead the excuse of age for again indulging in reminiscence, I should like to repeat the retort of a Middle Western student to whom I gave a low mark in a literature examination. She asked the reason, and I told her that her paper was not only lacking in knowledge but was very carelessly written. She flashed back, "Well, I thought it was an examination in literature. I did not know it was an exercise in composition. I don't call that a square deal." The notion that the English in which a literature paper is written does not matter holds of course all the

more for reports in history or politics or economics, and the writing that the students do outside of college is more slovenly still. It is just this sense of college composition as a thing apart that gives an air of unreality to the whole course of instruction, and makes the work that is done ineffective. Obviously what we wish to cultivate is the habit of correct writing; and the first step seems to me to be to make sure that all the writing done in college is well done. This is my one practical suggestion, and it may be that you will hold that this suggestion is not practical. I am aware that there are obstacles to be overcome in the administration of such a plan, but they are not insuperable, especially in a college with a small staff and a proportionately limited number of courses; under the elaborate organization of a large college in which the elective system has been allowed to run riot, the task is, no doubt, more difficult. The professors of politics and history may fear that the students will take the time for writing off the time for reading; and the English instructors shudder at the prospect of more themes on unfamiliar subjects; physics and chemistry may suspect the possibility of servitude to English, and English that of servitude to chemistry and physics. But when these bogies have been induced to slay each other, and the good will of all concerned is secured, a workable scheme may be devised—I will not say easily, but with no more trouble than is involved in half a dozen other tasks of university administration. Those who think the plan worth trying may be interested in a program actually in force in the Columbia School of Journalism, which I append in the form of a circular drawn up by my friend, Dr. Gerhard R. Lomer.

This is a short step, but I believe that it is a step in the right direction. I am quite prepared to be told that it is a step in the wrong direction, that it implies a further divorce between thought and expression, and so on; but even the proof of that objection—and I do not believe it to be true—would not content me. I should like to know in what other direction we ought to move, or at any rate to be persuaded that we have reason to be satisfied with standing still.

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM, 1912

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS FOR FRESHMEN COURSES

The plan here proposed for the assignment of written work for Freshmen in the School of Journalism at Columbia University involves the following factors:

1. The English course shall not be regarded as a subject entirely disconnected from the rest of the course and as having a subject-matter peculiarly its own. The various phases of the student's work are to be united as organically as possible; and to this end the process of expression in language seems to afford the most efficient means. All subjects, therefore, will be called upon to provide material for writing.

2. The aim of the English course is to develop the power of clear thinking and of coherent and effective expression. Hence the details of mechanical accuracy (spelling, punctuation, and grammar) are considered only in so far as they are essential to habits of accuracy and as a means for efficiency of communication.

3. In such courses as Journalism 1 (History and Principles of Natural Science) and Philosophy J (Introductory Course) where writing is regularly done, the written work is first read by the instructors in Journalism and in Philosophy, and is marked by them as is the custom in courses where credit is given for the collection and organization of material supplementary to class work. The themes are then passed on to the Instructor in English, who goes over each in detail as carefully as if the theme were originally presented as an exercise in English writing, and gives it a grade which counts for work in English.

4. All written work in the Freshman year, therefore, is read by at least one instructor and is returned to the students for correction. Conferences are held with individual students weekly and the themes are gone over by the Instructor in English, who indicates in both a general and a detailed way how the work could be improved.

5. With 18 required hours of class work, three of which are given to English, every student is required to write 1,500 words each week.

6. The dates in the schedule are those on which the themes are due and not the dates on which the assignments are to be made. It is suggested that the subjects for 1,000-word themes be announced at least ten days and those for 500-word themes a week before the dates on which they are due. It is requested that papers be read and handed to the Instructor of English at least by the end of the week following the day on which they become due.

1912	W	Oct. 16	Journalism	500 words
	FS	18, 19	Languages†	1,000
	MT	21, 22	History	500
	W	23	Philosophy (or Journalism*)	500

* For students who are not taking Philosophy.

† Including Composition and Translation from French and German.

1912	FS	Oct. 25, 26	Languages	500 words
	M	28	Journalism	1,000
	FS	Nov. 1, 2	Languages	500
	M	4	Philosophy (or Journalism*)	500
	FS	8, 9	Languages	1,000
	MT	11, 12	Politics	500
	W	13	Journalism	500
	FS	15, 16	Languages	500
	MT	18, 19	History	500
	W	20	Philosophy (or Journalism*)	500
	FS	22, 23	Languages	500
	M	25	Journalism	1,000
	Th.	Nov. 28	Thanksgiving holidays begin.	
	MT	Dec. 2, 3	Languages	1,000
	W	4	Philosophy (or Journalism*)	500
	MT	9, 10	Politics	500
	W	11	Journalism	500
	FS	13, 14	Languages	500
	MT	16, 17	History	500
	W	18	Philosophy (or Journalism*)	500
	FS	20, 21	Languages	500
	Sun	Dec. 22	Christmas Holidays begin.	
1913	M	Jan. 6	Journalism	1,000
	FS	10, 11	Languages	500
	M	13	Philosophy (or Journalism*)	500
	FS	17, 18	Languages	1,000
	W	22	Midyear examinations begin.	

* For students who are not taking Philosophy.